

STRANGERS IN A STRANGE LAND

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Stanley Schroeder can still remember the first day he saw a Hasidic Jew.

Schroeder was walking to the post office, and heading toward him was a man with long curly sideburns and a black, very full beard. In tiny Postville, Iowa, pretty much everyone knows everyone else, and this guy was like no one the 75-year-old Postville native had ever seen. The stranger was dressed in a thick, ankle-length black frock. And that's not all. His hands were clasped behind his back, his eyes cast down at the sidewalk, and he was mumbling something to himself in a foreign language.

But what struck Schroeder most was the yarmulke. Even with the sudden gusts of autumn wind sweeping over the Iowa cornfields, billowing across the pastures where Guernsey cows and Hereford cattle graze, and whipping through the dusty Postville streets, this "little black beanie," as Schroeder calls it, somehow managed to stay firmly affixed to the stranger's head.

That was seven years ago, just after a hardy band of ultra-orthodox Lubavitcher Jews decided to leave the confines of their religious communities in Brooklyn, N.Y., Russia, Israel, Canada and Ukraine to go west. They landed in the unlikeliest place: sleepy Postville (population: 1,512), a speck of a town in Allamakee County, in the northeast corner of Iowa.

Today, about 150 Lubavitcher Jews live in Postville. With 28 Hasidic rabbis, Postville probably has more rabbis per capita than any other city in the world. Strolling around Postville these days is like finding yourself on a set for "Fiddler on the Roof," with scores of extras scurrying about.

Postville became their promised land after a Brooklyn, N.Y., entrepreneur by the name of [Aaron Rubashkin](#) in 1988 bought a defunct, run-down meat-processing plant in Postville and resurrecting it as a 65,000-square-foot kosher slaughtering house. Rubashkin installed his two sons, Sholom and Heshy as managers, and after six years of operation, Rubashkin's Agriprocessors today grosses more than \$80 million a year.

Each week, 1,200 cattle, 80,000 chickens, 2,000 turkeys and 500 lambs are trucked into the renovated Agriprocessors plant, and each week a million pounds come out processed in refrigerated trailer-trucks bound primarily for Chicago, New York, Los Angeles and [Miami](#).

Rubashkin imported shochem (rabbis trained to supervise the kosher processing of the meat) and hired relatives and friends in key positions at the plant. Employees' families followed, and today the Lubavitchers form 10 percent of Postville's population. The Lubavitchers have started a yeshiva to educate their children, converted one of the oldest houses in town into a shul (synagogue) and have even built two mikvahs

(ceremonial bath houses). The Lubavitcher Jews have bought 30 homes, and now are Postville's new power elite-in a region and state where Pork is King.

The last time sleepy Postville experienced such rapid growth was during the 1920s, when German Lutherans flocked to these gently rolling hills, near Iowa's borders with Wisconsin and Minnesota, to start dairy, cattle and hog farms. Seventy years later, Postville is preparing for its greatest growth spurt ever. The boom years are back.

In all of Iowa, perhaps in all the Midwest, there is no greater sense of a time warp than in Postville. A common sight is rabbis with foot-long beards and long, black wool overcoats, pacing along downtown's Lawler Street, deep in Yiddish discussion, as groups of farmers wearing dirty overalls and muddy rubber boots grouse about fertilizer and hog prices, while gaggles of blond teenagers jaw about who's going to ride on the homecoming float.

The Lubavitcher migration also has transformed isolated Postville, located 250 miles from Chicago, into a social laboratory. The hard Iowa farm life mandates a connectedness, a mutual support system among neighbors. Through the brutal Iowa winters, scorching summers, pesticide-thick springs and around-the-clock autumn harvests, a civic bond is vital if the community is to survive. The Iowans are friendly and neighborly; the Lubavitchers rely on their own mishpocheh (family). They are wary of non-Jews, to whom they refer as "the Goyim."

"The Jews are lambs surrounded by 70 wolves," says Rabbi Moishe Feller, a Lubavitcher rabbi in St. Paul who has made dozens of trips to Postville.

"They've got to stick close to each other and to the shepherd at all times." If they stray too far, the rabbi seems to imply, they'll get eaten.

So, that's what was going on the autumn morning seven years ago when Stanley Schroeder first saw the Lubavitcher Jew walking alone along a Postville street, whispering in Hebrew, near the post office.

"I guess he was praying to himself," Schroeder says.

But why did the Lubavitchers pick a place with so many wolves?

"My older brother said I was crazy to move to Iowa, that I was meshugge (crazy)," says [Sholom Rubashkin](#), who runs most of the glatt (kosher) procedures at Agriprocessors. The Lubavitchers are there for a simple reason: It's more profitable to move the slaughterhouse to the cattle than the cattle to the slaughterhouse, as had been done in America for more than a century.

Like two of the most unlikely suitors, the locals and the Lubavitchers went through alternative spells of infatuation and loathing in the beginning. Today, both cultures, so wary and protective at first, have learned to live together. Both realize they need each other to survive.

In a nation where scores of cultures have shed native identities and become a part of the great melting pot, the Lubavitcher Jews in Postville and everywhere else staunchly maintain a separate identity. In a comparison Lubavitchers surely would condemn, many Hasidic tenets are similar to those of the Amish. Both advocate withdrawal from secular society, abstinence from anything powered by electricity or gas (for the Amish, seven days a week; for the Jews, one day), no physical work on the Lord's day or the Sabbath, intense procreation (families of 8 to 10 children are not unusual) and strict domestic roles for women.

Amish might be expected to settle in rural villages miles away from the nearest [McDonald's](#). But ultra-orthodox Jews in the middle of the cornfields of Iowa, where pigs outnumber people 10 to 1?

The vast majority of Jews establish homes in urban centers. Jews are not farmers, and where their ancestors settled shows that. In America, the greatest concentrations of Jews are in New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. Many say to share a sense of Jewishness means to be a part of a greater community of Jews, a shared experience of values, heritage and history. A nearby kosher deli that serves cheese Danish doesn't hurt, either. But while the Postville IGA hasn't yet added a shelf of Dr. Brown's Cel-ray Tonic, Manischewitz matzos or even Aaron's Best (Agriprocessors' trade name) next to the frozen-food case of pork loins, pork chops and pigs' hooves, for both the Postville locals and the Lubavitchers, the experiment of two opposite cultures living side by side has worked. Some in Postville might even allow that both cultures enjoy each other.

What could have happened in pastoral Postville might have become an allegory of small-town prejudice as two strong and proud cultures met head-on in a collision course. Instead, the saga of Postville is a parable about how rural America learns to survive.

The story, though, could have gone something like this:

A heartland town is on the skids; its population continues to decline as the old die and the young leave. The one cash cow-Hygrade Food Products, the meat-processing plant-closes, and for more than a decade, lies fallow. Real estate prices plummet. The town's only hospital closes because, as the mayor puts it, "We don't have any doctors or any patients."

Then a glimmer of hope appears. A man from Brooklyn expresses muted interest in the abandoned meat-processing plant. For the right price, he will buy it, and-presto!-rejuvenate the town. Yes! say the townspeople.

With the new owner comes a bizarre breed of immigrant-not Iowans, but Jews. For many in Postville who have never ventured outside Iowa, these newcomers are eye-openers. If their religion isn't exotic enough, the foreigners come with dark hats, long coats and an inscrutable language.

They move en masse to tiny Postville; each year, as relatives write relatives about their new lives in the American heartland, more and more come, and within five years, the Lubavitchers make up 10 percent of the population. The numbers, though, don't tell the whole story. The new immigrants, according to Biblical scripture, are fruitful and multiply.

Families of seven, eight children are not unusual. Yet children, the great equalizer, are unable to meld the two disparate cultures; the Jews are proscribed from mingling with their Iowa counterparts. The Hasidim start a separate school. They keep to themselves; the women are not allowed to make eye contact with the locals.

It would be difficult for Postville locals not to come to believe that their land has been taken over by these newcomers. The less charitable assessment from the locals is that not only their land but their lives are being run by the Jews. Small incidents of anti-Semitism start cropping up. A Hasidic Jew is called a "kike" by a carload of teenagers.

Then, a Lubavitcher family wakes up to find a cross burning on its front lawn.

But wait a minute. Stop the film. That isn't the case in Postville. Instead, in events that few in the town would ever have envisioned, Jews and locals are getting along famously. Something strange and serendipitous has happened. Few religious communities today-whether Jewish or not-could be created from scratch in seven or eight years. Fewer secular communities could accept newcomers as wholeheartedly as the Postville people eventually did.

The Postville library last fall received a shipment of books in Hebrew from Minneapolis. Many of the library's Hardy Boys mystery books have been checked out by Lubavitcher families. In September, when the Walker Brothers' Family Circle pulled into town, five Jewish families with almost 30 kids sat under the big top. The Jewish kids giggled just like the gentile kids when a white poodle, dressed in a Batman cape and mask, pranced around on her hind legs. When a mysterious "princess" performed death-defying acts on the high wire, both the Jewish and the gentile kids let out the same terrified gasps.

At Agriprocessors' Hanukkah party last year, when the gentile workers plugged in a tape deck and urged Sholom Rubashkin to dance with the women employees, he quite naturally said he wasn't able to dance with a gentile woman. Rubashkin pulled some of the guys out onto the floor and danced with them, which left all the employees in stitches.

Heshy Rubashkin, Sholom's younger brother, even went water-skiing a couple of summers ago with Kedrick Groth, a young hog farmer.

"The first two years here, I thought I'd go crazy," Sholom Rubashkin says with such a thick New York accent that not even a toddler could confuse it with the crisp diction of an Iowan. Today Sholom Rubashkin is a born-again Iowan.

To see dozens of Jewish men, all in black hats and coats davening (swaying back and forth and praying), and then leaving the Postville shul in single file, with row after row of corn in with what appears to be an endless green and yellow maze of fields on all four sides, stretching for miles and miles, is something to behold. Says Rubashkin: "It really is amazing, baruch ha-Shem (Thank God). It's more than amazing. You feel like you're a pioneer."

Rubashkin, at least for the Postville Jews, has a status akin to that of a venerated rebbe (rabbi). "We've got wonderful, wonderful neighbors," he says. "We don't look down on them. We are honest with everyone. I mean, if you smile at them, they'll smile back."

Maybe it boiled down to who was going to crack the first smile.

Certainly, in the beginning, few would have thought the two cultures would ever have anything to do with each other. If this was going to be a marriage, it was more shotgun than made-in-heaven.

Early on, the locals felt the Lubavitchers snubbed them.

"We're just not used to people coming in here and not wanting to be a part of us," says Schroeder. "Iowans get along with everybody."

Stanley Schroeder should know. His father in 1920 started Schroeder and Schultz Co., Postville's downtown general store.

A small, intense man with eyes that seem to get larger when he's excited, Postville's unofficial historian has amassed 50,000 typewritten pages on Postville's history.

He's got so much Postville history that his wife insisted that Schroeder build an addition onto their 1890's brick house to keep all his papers out of her way.

"I'm from the old school," Schroeder says. "When I walked down the street and I saw them wearing their black beanies and long coats, I'd say 'good morning' or 'hello there,' but they didn't even make eye contact. I'd want to invite them in for some cookies and Kool-Aid, but they didn't want to have anything to do with us." (The reason the Lubavitchers will never take Schroeder up on his Kool-Aid-and-cookies offer is that they can't-unless the Kool-Aid and cookies are kosher and served in a paper cup and on a paper plate.)

Even jovial Rev. Chuck Miller, who until the end of last year led the city's largest church, St. Paul Lutheran, with 1,300 members, and who is a walking billboard for the Will Rogers aphorism "I never met a man I didn't like," was miffed at the Lubavitchers at first.

For the first seven years, none of the Hasidic rabbis in Postville ever called Miller. None had deigned to introduce himself, and when Miller sought to establish a sort of ecumenical summit, he wasn't able to get a single rabbi to talk to him-until last July when Miller's phone rang in the church rectory. It wasn't much, maybe a five-minute conversation, just a tte--tte about a vexing Biblical question between two clerics who read the same book and pray to the same God.

When the Lubavitchers first started arriving in Postville, Miller says, more than a few parishioners came up to him and asked him to "do something about the Jews taking over this God-fearing town." As time went on, about every fourth sermon Miller delivered stressed humility and tolerance.

Miller says he left Postville recently for a smaller Wisconsin church for personal reasons. Last Thanksgiving, though, he set out to actualize his dream of an ecumenical summit. With clergy from Postville's other two churches, Miller invited the Lubavitchers to a community service-a Postville event that's been going on for as long as anyone in those parts can remember.

Miller first proposed holding the meeting at the high school gymnasium, because he figured the Jews would not set foot in a church. Then he was told that as long as the service was not in a sanctuary, it could be held under his church roof. So the service was shifted to St. Paul's fellowship hall. Then late word came that none of the Lubavitchers could attend.

It was like the Pilgrims planning a big Thanksgiving shindig, going out of their way to be civil to the Indians-only to be slighted at the last minute when the Indians pull out.

"The Jewish community always had a reason not to come," Miller says. "What they were really saying was, 'We aren't interested.' But that's who they are. They are going to maintain their identity by always keeping their walls up."

Ironically, it was migration of a different kind, many years before the Jews starting settling in Postville, that caused a similar uproar here.

There were so many German Lutherans migrants in Postville in the first half of the century that until the mid-1950s church services were conducted entirely in German. With each cancellation of another German-language service, older members of the community would complain to the Lutheran pastor. But as more younger American-born families moved in, pressure increased to discontinue the German services and replace them with English liturgies.

Today, the heart of this community is the kosher meat processing plant, which employs almost 250, both Jews and non-Jews. Postville is pressing to annex the land on which the plant is located (300 feet from the city line), which would increase control the city has over the slaughterhouse. Annexation also would create additional tax revenue for the city. Postville Mayor John Hyman was swept into office two years ago on a single campaign promise: Let the voters decide in a referendum whether to annex or not.

The Lubavitchers say, in no uncertain terms, that if Agriprocessors is annexed, they'll leave. Rubashkin says annexation would kill the kosher goose that lays Postville's golden eggs.

"If you are annexed, you have to live by the law of the city," says Rubashkin. "We never would have come here if the plant was within the city limits. Packing-houses don't belong in cities."

"When we want to build something, we build it," says Agriprocessors' plant manager, Don Hunt, of the advantage of the company's current status. "At the end of the year, the county sends us a form, and we tell them what we've done."

Hunt says Agriprocessors wants to expand and create as many as 85 jobs, but if the city annexes the land, Agriprocessors will entertain offers from other states that "would provide us with incentives to move there."

"Our community is hemmed in now," Mayor Hyman says. "We need to expand, but if they moved out, our community would die. It'll bounce back, but it'll take time."

One councilman, Fred Comeau, says Postville ought to forget all this talk about annexation. He said a city consultant found that Agriprocessors paid \$623,000 over a nine-month period to 41 small local businesses for construction, plumbing, heating and electrical work. "For every dollar of payroll, it turns over seven times," says Comeau. "When Hygrade left town, we had 40 to 50 houses up for sale, he says, and if Agriprocessors left, it would mean a significant loss for the city in retail trade."

Beneath all the posturing, the issue is control. Some Postville locals say their feet are getting uncomfortably hot being held so close to the fire, which both they and their Hasidic newcomers helped ignite when Agriprocessors was so warmly welcomed here seven years ago.

"Those people think they're outside the law," says Gordon Lawson, the retired owner of the local Ford tractor dealership and member of the city's Board of Adjustment.

"They go ahead and do what they please. They've threatened dozens of times to move out. They just don't have the ability to sit down and listen. No one gets very far with threats. If you won't listen, how're you going to learn? They've slipped around regulations. They've built a new home without following any procedures-no plotting or submitting plans to the city. They don't follow procedures. They just do it-and everyone else be damned!"

Certainly there's a lingering sentiment that the Jews have been fantastically successful at the slaughtering house, whereas the previous owners, good ole' Iowa boys, failed miserably. Unlike Hygrade, which paid union wages, Rubashkin starts his line workers at \$5.75 an hour. No one pretends that the work is neat, pretty or very remunerative.

Equally certainly, though, with an estimated \$80 million a year in gross sales, Agriprocessors generates huge amounts of money, and where the money goes-back into the plant, into the community, to other Rubashkin enterprises, to Brooklyn-is unknown because the business is privately owned. Rubashkin says it's bad luck-others say bad politics-to "talk numbers." He has started a real estate firm, called Nevel Properties, which actually owns many of the homes that the Lubavitchers live in, says Comeau's wife, Karen Kugel, a real estate agent with Postville's Community First Agency. The Lubavitchers, she says, go for larger-style Postville homes, which sell for \$46,000 to \$49,000.

Many people in Postville seem to believe that if a referendum were to take place, it would be handily defeated.

Most of the problems that crop up center on cultural differences. Iowans, many say, have a profound sense of order. When spring comes around, lawns are mowed and edged, errant leaves are whisked off yards; in winter, snowy front walks often are shoveled before the snow stops falling. But because few Lubavitchers knew what a

yard of lush grass was back in Brooklyn or Russia, hardly any Hasids ever had pushed a lawn mower, and some of their lawns in Postville looked it. To many Hasidic Jews shoveling snow is as alien as eating glazed ham. But today, as long as it's not Saturday, Jews are learning to deal with the suburban albatross that goes along with owning a home.

Reserved Iowans are loathe to attract attention. Yet last Hanukkah, one Lubavitcher erected a six-foot menorah atop his car and drove it up and down Postville streets for the eight days of the holiday. Postville natives didn't quite know how to react, except to shake their heads.

In their first years in town, when a Lubavitcher got behind the wheel of a car, many residents would run for cover. Few of the newcomers had owned or driven a car before. They made U-turns in the center of town and drove up on the curb. One Lubavitcher parked in the center of Lawler Street and left her car there for the afternoon. The driving has improved, but many still don't have drivers' licenses or register their cars.

Lubavitcher men, as Stanley Schroeder could not help noticing that first day, do not wear standard Postville garb: Oshkosh or Ben Davis overalls. Since almost all the Lubavitchers work in the kosher meat-processing plant, many walk around town with large white aprons, splattered with blood. Almost all have beards and payess (sidelocks of hair). The women wear calf-length dresses and take special care to cover their arms with long sleeves. Many shave their heads or clip their hair short enough to accommodate wigs or scarves worn in public.

On Saturday, the Sabbath, no electricity may be used, stoves must not be lighted, telephones must not be used, cars must not be driven, certain medicines may not be taken. For the truly observant, objects may not be carried on their person. Tearing a piece of paper along an unperforated edge is proscribed.

The Lubavitchers' worldwide population is estimated at 200,000, with about 25,000 living near the sect's world headquarters, a 50-block area in the Crown Heights section of Brooklyn. Their movement is the largest of some 40 Hasidic groups that began in the 18th Century as a populist response and revivalist movement aimed at alienated Jewish peasants in Russia. It spread through Eastern Europe shtetls (communities), and centered on a circle of charismatic, mystical enthusiasts. Its faith is anchored in the return of the Messiah, now presumed to be Rebbe Menachem Mendel Schneerson, the seventh in a dynastic lineage of Lubavitcher leaders. Schneerson died in Crown Heights on June 12, 1994.

Each Jewish home in Postville has the obligatory mezuzah (scriptural scroll) on each doorpost. Shabbos (Sabbath) candles are lit at exactly sundown (the daily times are listed in Lubavitcher calendars hanging in all Hasidic homes). At least one picture of the revered Rebbe Schneerson hangs in each house. Shabbos dinners are happy, often outrageous Friday night events, where families eat and kibitz over tray after tray of food lovingly prepared all week long by a bevy of Jewish women.

With a minyan (quorum) of 10 men, observant Hasids pray three times daily in the shul.

Shabbos dinner and prayer, though, do not a Lubavitcher community make. The Postville Lubavitchers did exactly what pioneers of the American West did when lighting out to parts unknown: After establishing work for the men, they created a house of worship for their families, and then opened a school for their children.

The Lubavitchers also converted a two-car garage on William Street, just off Lawler, into the ceremonial bath house -an absolute necessity for Hasidic women. During menstruation and for seven days afterward, a wife and husband are proscribed from touching-or even passing a plate-until the wife purifies herself.

"We used to have to drive all the way to Rochester (Minnesota, about 90 miles) every month, and in the winter, with all the snow-Oy, was that ever a problem!" says Leah Rubashkin, Sholom's wife.

The Lubavitchers bought the most expensive house in town, a majestic 1887 Victorian mansion, formerly a Sears mail-order house, and converted it into a shul, where 15 single Hasidic men live. In the basement, they constructed a mikvah for men to use before prayer.

To accommodate Postville's 50 Hasidic children, the Lubavitchers leased the basement of city hall, which used to be the Community Hospital, and two years ago set up a yeshiva for both religious and secular education. The Rubashkin family helped recruit three rabbis, who now teach at the school.

Even with the necessities in place, one would think the culture shock for the Jews would be severe. Postville and Brooklyn are probably more opposite than Nome and Miami. A pet in these parts is a pig, heifer or a calf. Public transportation means hopping in the back of your neighbor's pickup truck. To see a movie, you have to drive 30 miles.

Postville is the kind of place where every phone in town has the same prefix (864), and no one would ever use a telephone-answering machine, certainly at home. In New York, people place signs on their locked car windows that read, "No radio." In Postville, people leave the radio playing and their keys in the car when they run out to get a Slurpy at Casey's.

On a planet where more people recognize a Big Mac than Big Ben, Postville proudly claims not a single fast-food restaurant. Of course, there's absolutely no way the Lubavitchers would ever set foot in such places. They didn't move to Iowa to mix with the Goyim. Indeed, the Lubavitchers have waged holy war against assimilation, a Jewish trend that Lubavitchers liken to "the spiritual holocaust." Coming from a place where, if not on every corner, every street had a shul, when the Lubavitchers arrived in Postville, they were like gefilte fish out of brine jelly. But it didn't make any difference to them. They were on a mission.

"If you are committed to your faith, there is no culture shock," says Rabbi Feller. "Postville and Crown Heights are one and the same."

Maybe that's true for the Jews, but not for the locals. Sharon Drahm, editor of the weekly Postville Herald-Leader, says that during the first years, lots of gentile eyebrows were raised. The reactions did not have to do with the new settlers being Jewish, but more with their being outsiders. Five years ago, when a 34-year-old

Lubavitcher worker was walking downtown on a Friday night, a car sped by and someone shouted, "Heil, Hitler!"

Back in 1993, Rubashkin and other machers (bigwigs) in the Lubavitch community knew they needed to do something to inform the gentile community just what its new neighbors were like. So they called on St. Paul-based Rabbi Manis Friedman, a star in the international Lubavitcher community, and then set up a community meeting.

Something astonishing happened: More than 200 people showed up. Rabbi Friedman, who sported a fedora and a long gray beard, tried out some jokes. Friedman kibitzed that normally when you have two people, you have two opinions. But with Jews, he said, when you have two people you have three opinions.

Many in the audience shifted uncomfortably. They didn't know what the heck to do. Someone asked whether Jews need more than one synagogue to practice their faith.

"There must be two synagogues, so we can boycott one of them," Friedman cracked. Welcome to Jewish Humor 101.

Friedman's shtick worked eventually, but it also underscored the fact that these Jews and their leaders were like no one Postville had seen before.

Since Hasidic boys and girls are not allowed to swim together, to use the town's public pool requires all gentiles to leave, and then a separate swim hour for each sex must be arranged. None of the 467 students enrolled in Postville's kindergarten-8th-grade school is Hasidic.

"We've asked that the Hasidic children play on our playground," says Postville K-8 Principal Daryl Bachtell. "But the answer is always no."

Last May, Bachtell had a brainstorm. He planned to show Postville students a video about the new Holocaust Museum in Washington, D.C. A day before the show, he had a thought: Why not invite the children from the yeshiva?

Alas, the request was turned down. There was no way Hasidic kids could mingle with both boys and girls.

Still, Bachtell's charge is to serve all students, not just those enrolled in his school. In fact, the district has much to gain by increasing student enrollment in Postville, whether at the public schools or the yeshiva. The district supplies the yeshiva with desks, books, pencils and workbooks-and in return the district earns about \$2,000 per student.

With 50 students in the Yeshiva, that means a windfall for the district of \$100,000.

Editor Drahn, in the best small-town journalism tradition, has used her newspaper as a town crier. The Herald-Leader is located in a storefront downtown, and last December, Drahn placed a Christmas tree in one window

and a menorah in the other.

Drahn's own version of hell would be living in a city like Chicago or New York. She loves small-town living. The largest urban area she's ever lived in was Iowa City (population: 60,000), where the [University of Iowa](#) is located.

"When we moved to Iowa City, you'd have to scrape my jaw from the floor. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. I'd never seen so many colors, races, nationalities."

But now Drahn has come to see a little of that diversity in Postville, and she likes it: "We've got Ukrainians, Hispanics, Russians, Israelis, New Yorkers, all in this tiny town," she says. "I mean, who'd ever think it?"

While the Postville telephone book is getting thicker, not all the Lubavitchers come from far away. Martin Appel, a University of Iowa statistics professor with a Ph.D. from Johns Hopkins University, commutes the 130 miles from his university office to his home in Postville. Appel is married to Beth, a blue-eyed, blond Christian convert from Lincoln, Neb.

No matter how accustomed Postville locals are to the Lubavitchers, the members of Stanley Schroeder's coffee klatch, which meets every morning at the local bakery, still talk about the newcomers. One thing that still sticks in the craw of many is a 1991 crime spree involving two Postville Hasidic youths.

Pinchas Lew and Phillip Stillman, both Agriprocessors workers, brandished a .357-magnum revolver and held up a popcorn vendor in the nearby town of Ossian. They then held up a convenience store in Decorah.

As the clerk, a 50-year-old grandmother, rang a silent alarm, Stillman shot her. The woman, who was critically injured, eventually recovered from the gunshot wound.

The two young men, easily spotted by the police in a lopsided car without license plates, were convicted. Lew, who drove the getaway car, was sentenced to 10 years. Stillman, the shooter, was sentenced to 55 years.

In a town where residents keep their doors unlocked, the incident was the worst crime anyone can remember.

Certainly, no one makes allowances for such lawlessness, but life for Hasids in Postville or anywhere else is akin to living in a nation within a nation. Hasidic culture sets itself apart from American culture, and for that matter, from mainstream Judaism. Hasidism carries its own deeply instilled history and myths, its indelible, almost-impossible-to-attain schema of how to lead a righteous life, to be a tzaddik (righteous man). There are thousands of codes to pass along from generation to generation, sacred obligations due in part to the particular history of the Jews. The Jews have been expelled from community after community. They have been hunted, murdered, the victims of unspeakable pogroms. They have always sought redemption as exiles.

But in a strange twist, that redemption has come in the form of goyish (gentile) farmland in northeastern Iowa. While no one is predicting, the odds are good (even though Rubashkin and the rest of the tzaddikim are not betting men), that the Lubavitchers will flourish in Postville.

"We never set out to create a community," says Rubashkin in his rapid-fire New York accent. "We came here to build a business, that's all. But we got so involved in what we were doing that today we have built something more than a factory, baruch ha-Shem."

The eldest child in the yeshiva now is 12, and Rubashkin isn't sure whether she'll attend religious boarding school in St. Paul or Chicago, or stay in Postville. Two new rabbis moved to town in September, and they will teach full time at the yeshiva. Rubashkin, who says he never likes to plan more than a day at a time, thinks eventually that the Postville Lubavitchers will have enough children to support a Jewish high school.

Thus far, there have been no Lubavitcher weddings in Postville. Hasidic Jews literally believe that marriages are made in heaven, that at birth, male and female parts of a single soul are sundered, to be united again in matrimony. And although some Postville Jews may be thinking about which Hasidic boy and girl would make a perfect shiddach (matrimonial match), no one is planning anything. Yet.

IMMIGRANTS TO THE HEARTLAND BRING HOPES AND PROBLEMS

More than 10 million immigrants arrived on American shores between 1980 and 1993, nearly double the number of those who arrived the preceding 13 years. Large numbers of immigrants are moving east and west, converging on the Heartland in waves of secondary migration.

The number of Asian immigrants in small-town America jumped 42 percent to more than 600,000, and the number of Hispanics has increased 23 percent to more than three million. In Minnesota, the Hispanic population jumped 68 percent in the 1980s; in Kansas, it grew 48 percent; in Iowa, it rose 28 percent.

The Wall Street Journal labeled this new kind of migration "a phenomenon," calling the Heartland the nation's hot location for the melting pot. Although the Heartland today is flooded with newly arrived immigrants, more are needed.

The jobs are certainly here, often in meat-packing plants. Wages are relatively high for immigrants, but their salaries soon peak. Lack of English skills effectively blocks immigrant workers from better, supervisory jobs.

Violent crime is increasing in almost all Heartland communities where large numbers of newcomers have migrated. The rapid injection of new immigrants often means housing shortages and overloaded social services.

Other Heartland newcomers have reached the middle class before they arrive there. They understand the nuances of American culture and business. They speak English. Like the Rubashkins in Postville, many bring with them savvy, money and technical knowledge.

The rural Heartland is these new pioneers' frontier, and they are taking parts of it by storm. They want a piece of the American economic pie. Some, like the Lubavitchers in Postville, have turned into power brokers, beating the Heartland gatekeepers at their own game.

